

Hopecel: A Qualitative Analysis of an Extreme Incel Using Hope Theory

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### **Abstract**

**Background:** Involuntary celibacy describes the state of lacking sexual or romantic relationships despite a desire to engage in them. The incel community is a loose collection of online forums and a space for incels to share their experiences. Recently, much discourse in the incel community has turned misogynistic and misanthropic. One of the most notorious incels is Elliot Rodger, who committed mass murder in 2014, killing himself in the process. Research into Rodger and inceldom has largely focused on negative aspects, while neglecting positive psychological aspects. To address this gap, we investigated the manifesto left behind by Rodger using a positive psychological framework, namely hope theory (Snyder, 2002). We asked how low trait hope and in what way prosocial and antisocial goals could be identified in his manifesto.

**Method:** Rodger's manifesto was analysed using deductive content analysis guided by hope theory. An initial unstructured coding scheme was created based on hope theory (Snyder, 2002). The source document was coded, and the coding scheme adapted in consideration of what aspects of hope theory were relevant in Rodger's life.

**Results:** Aspects of low trait hope were identified in Rodger's goal setting, pathway thinking, and agency thinking. Furthermore, Rodger's experienced multiple real-world aspects related to low trait hope, such as his depression. Rodger gradually changed from having prosocial to antisocial goals over the course of his life, the latter of which he acted out in his "Day of Retribution."

**Discussion:** Rodger's problems were largely related to his inability to create specific, realistic, and internal goals. His goal setting and poor social skills hindered him in creating plausible routes towards his goals and thwarted his motivation and perceived capability to reach his goals. Future research is needed to investigate whether hope theory plays a similar role in the lives of less extreme incels.

The term Incel, short for involuntary celibate, describes an individual who has a desire for sexual or romantic relationships but lacks a willing partner. Many Incels share their experiences with involuntary celibacy in the Incel community, a loose collection of online forums. The incel community is, in turn, part of a larger collection of websites, forums, and online-subcultures called the “manosphere” (Farrell, Fernandez, Novotny, & Alani, 2019; Nagle, 2017). Originally a space for progressive men’s issues activism, the manosphere is nowadays largely filled with misogyny and anti-feminism (Farrell et al., 2019; Nagle, 2017). Discourse within the manosphere has turned increasingly hostile to women in recent years (Farrell et al., 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; Nagle, 2017). Even though the incel community is part of the manosphere, women may identify as incels, too. However, research suggests that a large majority of incels is male (Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019). People may also be incels without being active in any related online spaces. Still, the role of related online communities and forums has been significant in shaping the incel community as it is known today (Massanari, 2017; Young, 2019). Thus, we will use the term incel to describe those involuntary celibates who are male and active in incel forums.

Many discussions in the incel community revolve around the deterministic world view that women select sexual partners exclusively based on physical appearance or social status (Jaki et al., 2019; Nagle, 2017). Some forums refer to this ideology as the blackpill. In this light, many incels blame women for depriving them of sex, based on their own perceived physical, psychological, or financial inadequacies (Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; White, 2017). Many incels express how this deprivation has led to hopelessness, depression, and suicidal ideation (Farrell et al., 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; Young, 2019). For some, these issues have led to misogynistic or misanthropic views, which they discuss on incel forums (Farrell et al., 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; Young, 2019). Considering existing literature, incels appear to be at a greater risk of facing certain mental health issues and adopting hostile attitudes towards others.

Psychological issues, misogynistic views, and violent revenge fantasies were also expressed and even translated into real-world violence by Elliot Rodger; he is to date the most notorious incel both in the general public and in the incel community, who often regard him as a hero (Blommaert, 2018). In 2014, Elliot Rodger murdered 6 and injured 13 more victims close to the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California. He left behind an about 140-page manifesto, detailing his life from his point of view (Rodger, 2014). In it, Rodger described how a life without sex or even the mere attention of women left him hopeless and depressed to the point of suicidal ideation (Rodger, 2014). He further described how he came

to develop a misogynistic ideology as a result and how it ultimately led him to plan his “Day of Retribution” (Rodger, 2014, p.101). Overall, the topics he discussed in his manifesto mirror the topics the Incel community discuss on their forums.

Most social science research on Incels have focused on the negative reasons for incels’ extremist ideologies (see for example Allely & Faccini, 2017; Langman, 2014; Scaptura & Boyle, 2019; Young, 2019) and the media has characterised incels exclusively in a negative manner (see for example Beauchamp, 2019; Williams, 2018). This is not surprising, given that indeed despicable crimes and misogynistic violence have been committed in the name of incels (“Elliot Rodger: How misogynist killer became ‘incel hero’”, 2018). However, most incels are not violent (Jaki et al., 2019); even those who are, like Rodger was, may need support and help to cope with the lack of sexual and romantic experiences. Research on well-being and happiness shows that sexual satisfaction and having a mate are related to overall life satisfaction (Bucher, Neubauer, Voss, & Oetzbach, 2019; Buczak-Stec, König, & Hajek, 2019; Woloski-Wruble, 2010; Zhu, 2018). Still, research on incels has, thus far, largely neglected such positive psychological concepts, and studied incels from an exclusively negative perspective.

Examination of Rodger and the incel community using only a negative lens may be problematic for three reasons. Firstly, it creates an incomplete picture by neglecting positive characteristics (Wood & Tarrier, 2010). Secondly, to prevent further incel-related violence, problem-focused approaches would require the identification of at-risk individuals for treatment (Allely & Faccini, 2017). This may be difficult and costly. Even successful identification may still not be enough. Although Rodger had been reported to authorities, he was able to convince them that he posed no threat (Rodger, 2014; White, 2017). Thirdly, although there is potential for radicalisation in the incel community, not all incels share the violent and misogynistic ideology which the incel community has been associated with (Jaki et al., 2019). Some may merely seek to express their suffering because of their incel status and feel isolated from the rest of society (Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis, & Dillard, 2001; Jaki et al., 2019). Being characterised in such a negative light may stigmatise and further ostracise them; this may, in turn, facilitate ongoing radicalisation processes (Anastasio, Rose, & Chapman, 2005). An exclusively negative focus may, thus, not be sufficient in providing feasible solutions to the problem or may even worsen incels’ plight.

Adding a positive lens to the examination of Incels may help rectify these problems. Firstly, taking positive aspects into account helps to create a more comprehensive picture of the situation, person, or group at hand (Wood & Joseph, 2010; Wood & Tarrier, 2010).

Secondly, interventions that foster positive functioning can be applied to both non-clinical and clinical populations (Wood & Tarrier, 2010). Increasing positive functioning can buffer from issues that incels face, like hopelessness, depression, suicide, and adverse effects of negative life events in general (Davidson, 2009; Garland et al., 2010; Wood & Joseph, 2010; Wood & Tarrier, 2010). Thirdly, instead of stigmatising Incels by constantly attributing negative characteristics to them, investigation with a positive focus shifts the perspective to possible change (Henry, 2004). Thus, adding a positive perspective to the study of Incels may provide a more comprehensive picture of their issues and more feasible prevention and solution approaches.

However, some members of the Incel community indeed suffer from serious psychological issues and may be at greater risk to commit suicide or violence, as was the case with Elliot Rodger (Jaki et al., 2019; White, 2017). Rodger does not represent the incel community as a whole. Still, research on Rodger has provided insights into how incels may come to commit violent acts (Allely & Faccini, 2017; White, 2017). Despite the potential benefits of positive psychological approaches, there is to date a dearth of studies on Rodger using respective theories. One such theory that may help fill this gap is hope theory (Snyder, 1994, 1995, 2002; Snyder et al., 1997). In hope theory, trait hope is conceptualised as one's ability to create goals, routes towards these goals, and respective thoughts related to motivation and self-efficacy (Snyder, 1994, 1995, 2002; Snyder et al., 1997). People low in trait hope are at greater risk of facing issues such as, among others, depression and loneliness as compared to people high in trait hope (Snyder, 2002). These issues are similar to those that Rodger described in his manifesto (Rodger, 2014; White 2017). We address the gap in scientific literature by investigating Elliot Rodger's manifesto using hope theory. Specifically, we investigate whether Rodger was low in trait hope (Snyder, 1995, 2002).

### **Hope Theory**

The concept of hope consists of three aspects: goals, pathway thinking, and agency thinking (Snyder, 1994, 1995, 2002). Goals provide direction to human action and, thus, guide it. Pathway thinking describes individuals' ability to create routes and alternative routes towards their goals. Agency thinking is the motivational component of hope theory; it describes individuals' mental energy and perceived ability to reach their goals. Clearly defined goals allow individuals to find pathways and motivation towards them (Snyder, 2002). In contrast, goals that are formulated vaguely exacerbate the process of finding pathways towards and motivation to reach them (Snyder, 2002). Hope in terms of hope theory, is not about hopeful thinking for the future as the term is often used in everyday language. Instead,

it is about setting goals, finding paths towards them, and how much individuals believe in their ability and are motivated to utilise these paths.

Hope theory differentiates between low hoppers, who form goals and respective routes vaguely or unrealistically and have little faith their ability to reach goals, and high hoppers, their respective counterparts (Snyder, 1995, 2002). Low trait hope is related to psychological, social, and academic issues. Low-hope individuals are, for instance, more prone to be depressed, to be lonely, to struggle with interpersonal relationships, and to perform worse in academic settings as compared to their high-hope counterparts (Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael, & Snyder, 2006; Snyder, 2002; Snyder, Cheavens, et al., 1997; Snyder, Hoza, et al., 1997; Taysi, Curun, & Orcan, 2015). Given that low hoppers engage in less successful goal-setting behaviour as compared to their counterparts (Cheavens, 2019), it may be the case that they are less able to reach their goals in, amongst others, social or academic domains and suffer because of it. Trait hope also works as a buffer against negative life events (Visser, Loess, Jeglic, & Hirsch, 2013). Without this buffer, low hoppers may be more vulnerable to negative life events, such as failing to reach one's goals. Rodger discussed issues in his manifesto that are similar to those faced by low hoppers; these included, amongst others depression, loneliness, academic and social problems (White, 2017). The considerable overlap between the issues that low hoppers face and those expressed by Elliot Rodger begs the question of whether Rodger was a low hopper. If Rodger was low in trait hope, practitioners working with other extreme incels might benefit from considering interventions aimed at increasing hope. To the best of the author's knowledge, there is to date no research into Rodger and trait hope.

Research has shown that hope can be raised through different interventions. Hope-based interventions have been shown to increase hope, quality of life, life-satisfaction, self-worth, self-esteem, psychological health, and reduce depressive symptoms and hopelessness in diverse samples, such as undergraduate students, amphetamine users, and young cancer survivors (Ahari, 2012; Arnau, Rosen, Finch, Rhudy, & Fortunato, 2007; Berg, 2008; Berg et al., 2019; Cheavens, Feldman, Gum, Michael, & Snyder, 2006; Diessner, Rust, Solom, Frost, & Parsons, 2006; DoughAbadi, Soleimani, Ahmadi, & Javidi, 2016; Ho, 2012; Lai, 2019; Marques, 2011; Sadeghi, Ebrahimi, & Vatandoust, 2015). Research also shows that non-clinical populations, like middle-school or college students, can benefit from hope-based interventions, as well (Diessner et al., 2006; Marques, 2011). Finding applicable intervention approaches is paramount considering the violence that has been committed by some incels.

Hope theory is value-free in terms of the nature of one's goals. In other words, individuals may embrace goals that are prosocial or antisocial regardless of their trait hope. Prosocial goals reflect positive, accepted societal standards with antisocial goals as their opposite. Most people are raised in a way that promotes prosocial goals (Snyder & Feldman, 2000), but Rodger instead expressed and acted out violent, suicidal ideation (White, 2017). In what Snyder (2002) calls a "final act of hope" (p. 20), individuals may abandon all their other life goals in favour of a suicide goal (dying to escape the pain) after experiencing unending goal blockage. They may then prepare for their suicide, for instance by purchasing a gun, and experience high motivation (Snyder, 1994, 2002). Thus, paradoxically, the suicidal individual may show high trait hope in terms of high pathway and agency thinking in relation to their suicide goal. Incel mass shooters appear to have unmet relationship goals in that they lack sexual, romantic, and social relationships (White, 2017; Williams & Arntfield, 2020). They express desires for revenge and several incel mass shooters have committed suicide (White, 2017; Williams & Arntfield, 2020). It could have been the case that Rodger, one of these individuals, experienced continued goal blockage and abandoned his prosocial life goals of forming relationships. In place of them, he may have adopted antisocial, violent suicide goals and shown high trait hope in relation to it, which may have enabled him to reach them. Considering the violence Rodger committed, it is crucial to understand how his prosocial and antisocial goals may have been related to it.

### **The Present Study**

The aim of the present study was to provide a new perspective to the research on Elliot Rodger by applying a positive-psychology framework to his manifesto. Specifically, Rodger's manifesto was examined using hope theory as the theoretical framework. Research shows that extreme incels like Rodger face issues that mirror those faced by low hopers across several life domains, such as mental health issues or problems with social relationship. Furthermore, incels express misogyny and violent fantasies (Jaki et al., 2019; Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). Rodger acted both out in his the day he committed murder-suicide; Rodger, thus, possibly abandoned his prosocial goals in favour of antisocial ones. Hope theory may provide new insights into Rodger that could yield possible approaches to improve the lives of extreme incels and, thus, to prevent further suicide and (mass) murder by them. Considering the lack of positive-psychology oriented research on Rodger, we aim to fill this gap in research by qualitatively analysing his manifesto using deductive content analysis guided by a hope-theory framework. To this end, we ask the following research questions:

*RQ1*: What aspects of low trait hope can be found in Elliot Rodger's manifesto?

*RQ2*: In what way can prosocial and antisocial goals be identified in Elliot Rodger's manifesto?

## Method

### Procedure and Material

The present study was based on Elliot Rodger's manifesto, "My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger" (Rodger, 2014). A PDF file of it is publicly available on and was obtained from the website of The New York Times. The content of this file was compared to another version available in the digital archive Wayback Machine. To the best of the author's knowledge, both versions are the same and unedited. The document spans nearly 140 pages of exclusively written text.

Rodger's manifesto is an autobiographical recollection of his life. Rodger outlines his life through his interpretation. He presents in detail his emotional and interpersonal struggles, development of his misogynistic ideology, the reasoning for his actions, and the formation of his "Day of Retribution" (Rodger, 2014, p. 101; White 2017). His writings provide unique insights into the life of an extreme Incel who took the Incel ideology to a point of conclusion that ended in suicidal mass-murder.

Ethical approval for the present study was obtained from the ethics committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente.

### Data Analysis

In the present qualitative study, Rodger's manifesto was analysed using a deductive approach to content analysis. In deductive approaches to content analysis, codes are defined prior to analysis based on existing theory or literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This supports researchers in analysing data based on previous knowledge and testing concepts and hypotheses (Schreier, 2012).

Six initial codes were extracted from hope theory as presented by Snyder (2002) and sorted into a coding scheme presented in two tables for a better overview, given that three of these codes were about trait hope and three about real-world aspects related to trait hope. Table 1 shows the codes about hope. They included *goal setting*, *pathway thinking*, and *agency thinking*. Table 2 shows the codes about real-world aspects that are connected to hope theory and individuals' trait hope. They included the codes *outcomes*, *risk factors*, and *suicide goals*. The aspect of suicide goals was unique in that it could have been sorted into either group. It describes the process of discarding one's life goals in favour of a suicide goal. On



Table 1

*Overview of the codes about trait hope*

<b>Goal setting</b>	<b>Pathway thinking</b>	<b>Agency thinking</b>
Formulating goals that are specific and realistic	Creating plausible routes towards one's goals, articulating routes well	Motivation during all stages of goal pursuit, positive or negative self-talk, perseverance
Setting goals that are based on own values and independent of other people	Being decisive about routes	Mental energy, self-efficacy, perceived capability to reach goals
Setting goals that reflect accepted, positive societal standards (prosocial) or vice versa (antisocial)	Creating multiple routes towards goals, creating alternative routes and being flexible when faced with impediments	

*Note.* Adapted from 'hope theory: Rainbows in the mind,' by C. R. Snyder, 2002, *Psychological inquiry*, 13(4), pp. 249-275.

the one hand, it is about formulating a (suicide) goal, creating a pathway towards it, and having agency-thoughts about pursuing this goal. Thus, it could have been sorted into the first group of codes about trait hope. However, in hope theory, suicide goals are adopted after experiencing unending goal blockage. They are, thus, also a real-world consequence of hope, because of which it was decided to sort suicide goals into this group instead (Table 2).

Next, the document was read multiple times for the purpose of familiarisation with the data (Burnard, 1991; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Based on the initial coding scheme, the document was then coded using Atlas.ti. Meaningful fragments were chosen as the unit of analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). A fragment had to form a meaningful sentence on its own. For example, the sentence "I hated them so much, but I had to increase my standing with them" (Rodger, 2014, p. 28) was coded once for "I hated them so much" and once for "but I had to increase my standing with them."

Upon reading, it emerged that much of Rodger's story should be regarded in the larger context. Thus, all analysis was conducted in consideration of the greater context. "My destiny was to fight against the unfairness of the world", for example, may seem like a prosocial goal. However, Rodger says this in relation to how a twelve-year-old boy he knows kissed a girl nearly Rodger's age while Rodger himself never kissed a girl at age eighteen. Furthermore, it emerged that not all content of Rodger's manifesto was clearly related to hope theory, such as parts of stories that were merely descriptive. These parts of the document were excluded.

Table 2

*Overview of the codes about real-world aspects related to trait hope*

<b>Related outcomes</b>	<b>Risk factors</b>	<b>Suicide goals</b>
Academics - GPA, dropout rates	Caregivers – abuse, presence or absence during one’s childhood, boundaries, consistency, support, loss of caregivers	Continued, unending goal blockage
Athletics - success, and perseverance in sportive activities	Loss of partners – death, divorce, feeling ‘left behind’	Suicide as way out
Physical health – beneficial or detrimental health behaviour	Traumatic events – rape, robbery, severe car accidents, etc	Descriptions (of means) of suicide become more detailed, preparation
Psychological adjustment – Affect, quality of life, self-worth, life satisfaction, meaning making, magical escape fantasies		Lifted energy before attempt
Social relationships – hostility, social support, view of interpersonal relationships, forgiveness, tolerance, gravity on people, connecting with others		

*Note.* GPA = Grade Point Average. Adapted from ‘Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind,’ by C. R. Snyder, 2002, *Psychological inquiry*, 13(4), pp. 249-275.

To answer the research questions, relevant fragments from Rodger’s description of his teenage years until the end of his manifesto were coded. This part was chosen for coding because his inceldom-related struggles occurred in this period of his life, as compared to a childhood he described as happy. However, his childhood experiences were taken into account during coding to retain the larger context. His childhood was particularly considered in relation to the risk factors for losing hope. This was done because maladaptive caregiving in childhood can be a potential risk factor for losing hope (Snyder, 2002).

During the coding process, the initial coding scheme was largely adapted. This was done in consideration of aspects of hope theory as outlined by Snyder (2002), of how relevant they appeared in Rodger’s life, and of how they related to each other. In this process, codes were changed, and sub-codes were created. Some smaller aspects of the initial codes became distinct codes or sub-codes. For instance, *psychological adjustment* was part of *outcomes* in the real-world aspects related to trait hope (Table 2). It was changed into the distinct code *psychological maladjustment* with two sub-codes because of how significant it appeared in

Rodger's life. Another example is the aspect of escape fantasies. Snyder (2002) only briefly mentioned engaging in escape fantasies when discussing psychological adjustment of low hoppers. Such escape fantasies appeared to be an important part of Rodger's life. As such, *escape fantasies* was changed into a distinct code with three sub-codes. Furthermore, some codes were renamed. For instance, *outcomes* (Table 2) was renamed *performance outcomes* (Table 4) with the subcodes *low to mediocre success*, which covered the academic and athletic aspects, and *maladaptive health behaviour*. An overview of the final coding scheme is presented in Table 3 and Table 4.

Table 3

*Overview of the final codes about to trait hope*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Debilitating goal setting	Vague goals	I made another [...] bid to improve my social life.
	Unrealistic goals	I began to visualize myself winning the lottery.
	External locus	[...] if I wanted to be cool, I had to become a skateboarder.
Changing goal-nature	Prosocial goals	I <i>wanted</i> to be friends with them.
	Antisocial goals	I wanted to fight and kill them all.
Low pathway thinking	Lack of plausible routes	But attracting attention from girls? <i>How in the blazes was I going to do that?</i>
	Inflexibility	[...] wealth was the only way I could lose my virginity [...]
Low agency thinking	Self-doubt and low motivation	Each walk left me bitterly disappointed [...]
	Disoriented coping	I had a very hard time socializing with people, so I ended up drinking too much alcohol.
	Passivity	Such an opportunity wasted, all because no girl would give me a chance.

Table 4

*Overview of the final codes about real-world aspects related to hope*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Sub-code</b>	<b>Example Quote</b>
Psychological maladjustment	Negative emotions and depressive symptoms	My misery became harder and harder to bear [...]
	Low self-worth and envy	That guy was able to experience his college life with his beautiful girlfriend by his side, while I was all alone. It made me feel so inferior.
Escape Fantasies	Video games	My life was getting more and more depressing at that point, and WoW would fill in the void.
	Fantasy scenarios	I saw myself as a highly intelligent person who is meant for great things.
	Violent revenge fantasies	[...] I often had fantasies of how malevolently satisfying it would be to punish all of the popular kids and young couples for the crime of having a better life than me
Unsociability	Struggle to connect with others	Making friends seemed impossible.
	Hostile and unforgiving	I hated him so much when I saw that. [...] and I will never forget it, nor will I forgive it.
Performance outcomes	Low to mediocre success	Since I had dropped all of my college classes, I had all the time in the world.
	Maladaptive health behaviour	[...] but it provided good exercise, which I was in need of.
Risk factors	Caregivers	I believe it was my mother who told me that she and my father were getting a divorce [...]
	Traumatic events	I fell to the ground where they started kicking me and punching me in the face.
Mass-murder suicide	Escaping Misery	I fear death, but death is better than living such a miserable, insignificant life
	Suicide as the “final act of hope”	After going through every single fantasy I had about how I would punish my enemies, I started to detail all of my exact plans for how the Day of Retribution will play out.

After the manifesto was coded as described above, the resulting coding scheme was applied to random paragraphs throughout the manifesto to check whether saturation had been reached. The final scheme appeared to capture all relevant meaning. After some consideration, some codes appeared so related that they were put together. For instance, two sub-codes of *unsociability*, namely *hostility* and *unforgiving nature*, were combined into the sub-code *hostile and unforgiving*. After such codes were combined, no further adjustments were made.

Many aspects of hope theory were interrelated and some related to more than one code. In those cases, they were grouped in the code that was believed to be the most relevant. For example, engaging in escape fantasies is a distinct code, but also related to *Coping* (Table 4).

## Results

### Overview of the Coding Scheme

In total, ten codes were created. Four of those were about Rodger's trait hope, namely *debilitating goal setting*, *changing goal-nature*, *low pathway thinking*, and *low agency-thinking*. Six codes were about real-world aspects related to trait hope, namely *psychological maladjustment*, *escape fantasies*, *unsociability*, *performance outcomes*, *risk factors*, and *mass-murder suicide*. Each code had several sub-codes that added to a total of 23. The sub-codes are described in the following sections.

### Low Trait Hope

Four aspects of low trait hope were identified in Rodger's manifesto. They were captured in four codes with a total of 10 sub-codes. Namely, these codes were *debilitating goal setting*, *changing goal-nature*, *low pathway thinking*, and *low agency-thinking*. These codes described Rodger's thinking in terms of creating goals, routes, and his motivation and perceived capability to reach his goals.

**Debilitating goal setting.** This code was about the way Rodger's set and formulated his goals. He formulated goals vaguely, set goals that were unrealistic, and that had an external locus. This code had three sub-codes, namely *vague goals*, *unrealistic goals*, and *external locus*.

**Vague goals.** Rodger formulated his goals vaguely without much detail. For instance, one of his goals in college was to "improve [his] social life." At one point in college, Rodger managed to befriend someone. Despite improving his social life in this way, he perceived no change to his situation. He also expressed the desire to attend "wild drinking parties". When he managed to get into a party once, he still got angry quickly because he was not talking to

anyone and left. There were only few exceptions when Rodger set more specified goals, like when he vowed to finish High School early. He set a specific time frame and managed to reach his goal. Overall, however, Rodger's goals were formulated vaguely and did not provide him with direction to guide his actions.

**Unrealistic goals.** Throughout his life, Rodger held many goals that reflected typical human needs. Many of his goals were related to having a social life, such forming (intimate) relationships or being adored by others. However, he struggled with social interaction and was often unable to reach these goals. By the time he was in college, he wanted to socialise, especially with women, "but [he] just couldn't. [He] felt too insecure." He almost never engaged in conversations with strangers, despite the desire to do so. Taking this into account, his goals were much more unrealistic. As his life progressed, Rodger adopted goals that would make up for his perceived inability to be popular and attractive to women. He wanted, amongst others, to win the lottery. Financial wealth would "definitely make [him] attractive enough to have a beautiful girlfriend." He said:

Quote 1 [Q1]: When I saw the sun creeping up before me in the horizon, igniting the clouds with its orange glow, I proclaimed that sunrise as the sunrise of my destiny. I was riding towards my destiny, to obtain the record-breaking Powerball ticket of \$500 million!

Not only was this goal statistically near impossible, but his conviction of winning reaching it went to the point of delusion. Rodger often set goals that were unrealistic because of which he ended up not reaching them. This in turn, caused him negative emotions like anger and frustration.

**External locus.** Most of Rodger's goals were related to increasing his status with his peers, women, or society as a whole. The simultaneously biggest status symbol and judge of status, in his eyes, were women themselves:

[Q2] No one respects a man who is unable to get a woman. [...] A man having a beautiful girl by his side shows the world that he is worth something, because obviously that beautiful girl sees some sort of worth in him. If a man is all alone, people get the impression that girls are repulsed by him, and therefore he is a worthless loser.

Q2 shows that Rodger believed that men are judged based on how women perceive them. To him, men were only regarded as worthy by society if they had a woman's validation. In his words, "the boys who girls find attractive will [...] dominate the boys who girls deem

unworthy.” The way other people perceived him was, of course, outside of his direct control. Additionally, Rodger often felt disadvantaged concerning having other people’s admiration, particularly women’s, by his short stature and his social anxiety. He expressed beliefs that women were only interested in “tough jock-type men” who were tall and confident. Rodger’s goals were largely dependent on external factors, or at least factors that he felt he had no control over.

**Changing goal-nature.** This code was about the nature of Rodger’s goals in terms of setting goals that were prosocial or antisocial and about how the nature of his goals overall shifted from more prosocial to more antisocial over the course of his life. This code had the sub-codes *prosocial* and *antisocial*.

**Prosocial goals.** Early in his life, Rodger’s goals were largely about forming social relationships and having a high social status. Over the course of his life, he was increasingly unable to fulfil these goals. In middle school, for instance, he wanted to be regarded as popular and cool. Instead, “[he] was extremely unpopular, widely disliked, and viewed as the weirdest kid in the school.” Rodger held on to his prosocial goals despite continued frustration until he finally seemed to fully abandon them towards the end of 2013.

**Antisocial goals.** Despite holding on to his prosocial goals, Rodger was continuously unable to reach them and began to progressively adopt increasingly *antisocial goals*. These antisocial goals were related to his prosocial ones. Rodger wanted to destroy what he could not have. If he could not have a pleasurable social life full of beautiful women, no one could. Moreover, he desired women but held them above all responsible for denying him intercourse and their attention. As such, he developed the desire to hurt women instead. At age seventeen, he first developed fantasies about “[exacting] revenge on everyone [he envied] and [hated]” to show the world how powerful he is. These fantasies increasingly grew into explicit wishes to physically hurt and kill people. Over the course of this change in his goal nature, Rodger expressed more antisocial than prosocial goals, especially in his teenage and adult life.

**Low pathway thinking.** This code was about Rodger’s low ability to create primary and alternative routes towards his goals and his inflexibility in his goal-pursuit. This code had two sub-codes, namely *lack of plausible routes* and *inflexibility*.

**Lack of plausible routes.** Rodger lacked the ability to create plausible routes. Often, he could not come up with routes at all. This was particularly visible concerning his social-life goals. When it came to approaching others, engaging in conversation, and especially finding girlfriends “[he] couldn’t fathom how they [other male peers] did it.” Rodger wanted to make friends but could not create plausible routes towards this goal. He “never knew how to gain

positive attention, only negative.” This showed in how he “started to act weird and annoying” towards people in school and started fights with people in college, neither of which helped him make friends. In his adult life, he had the goal to win the lottery. To reach this goal, he created the implausible routes of willing himself to win and of visualising himself winning. There were only a few exceptions when Rodger create more plausible routes. When he set the goal to finish high school early, he asked the teachers for and completed extra homework daily, which allowed him to reach this goal since his school permitted students to work in their own pace. Usually, Rodger saw no way at all towards his goals or came up with routes that were unlikely to help him reach them.

***Inflexibility.*** Rodger was inflexible in his goal-pursuit, which especially showed when he was faced with impediments. He considered his few primary routes as “the only way” towards his goal; this showed his inability to create alternatives. Facing goal-blockage, he could not think of alternatives and quickly got derailed in his goal-pursuit. Additionally, he did not respond well to change and had a “rigid” personality. Rodger’s poor ability to create plausible routes and his inflexibility impaired his goal-pursuit and showed his low pathway thinking.

***Low agency thinking.*** This code was about Rodger’s *low agency thinking*, which showed in his self-doubt, his low motivation, his maladaptive coping style, and his passivity. This code had the three respective sub-codes *self-doubt and low motivation*, *disoriented coping*, and *passivity*.

***Self-doubt and low motivation.*** Rodger doubted himself and struggled to get and stay motivated about his goal-pursuit. He was often certain he would fail. At one point, he said:

[Q3] [...] I saw a very pretty girl who looked about the same age as I was. She had a face that melted my heart. What I would give to hold her in my arms and kiss that pretty face of hers... I wanted to talk to her, but I just couldn't. I felt too insecure. I was afraid she would think of me as a creep, as all other girls did.

Q3 shows how Rodger’s conviction that others would judge him negatively often thwarted his motivation to pursue his goals. He, thus, often gave up before trying. If Rodger ever found some motivation, he struggled to keep it high. There were several instances in which he found the renewed motivation to improve his social life. However, he quickly lost it when he continued to not engage in conversations with people and to, thus, get ignored. Correspondingly, he was not perseverant but quickly got derailed by impediments in his goal-



pursuit. Rodger's self-doubt mostly showed in the way he engaged in self-deprecating thoughts, convinced that others would evaluate him negatively.

***Disoriented coping.*** Rodger lacked adaptive ways to deal with setbacks and goal blockage. He struggled with emotion regulation and was prone to outbursts of sadness and anger. Watching others succeed in his goals while being unable to do so himself frustrated him. In response, he stuffed himself with food, drank increasing amounts of alcohol, or engaged in escape fantasies. Rodger saw no way to utilise goal blockage in a healthy way, such as finding meaning in it or learning from it. His disoriented coping spoke to his low agency thinking.

***Passivity.*** Rodger was passive in his goal-pursuit and appeared to have a generally passive mindset. Concerning his social goals, he hoped others would reach out to him, rather than actively engaging others himself, saying "I frequently went on walks around my mother's neighbourhood in the desperate hope that someone would befriend me or a girl would talk to me." Often, he also expressed the expectation that others would reach out to him because he believed himself superior to other men and had made attempts to change his appearance, for instance by buying expensive clothing. He believed he deserved other people's, especially women's, attention more than the people who got it. Specifically, "they [women] should be going for intelligent gentlemen such as [himself]." Rodger also believed that he had no active part in his experiences of constant goal blockage. Instead, he blamed his social-anxiety symptoms, his more confident male peers, and society. Most of all he blamed women "for the crime of not giving [him] the attention and adoration [he] so rightfully [deserved]!" Rodger's passive mindset also showed in the way he perceived his relationship with the rest of society:

[Q4] All while I was suffering this lonely existence, other boys my age lived their happy lives of pleasure and sex. [...] I had to make up for all the years I lost in loneliness and isolation, through no fault of my own! It was society's fault for rejecting me. It was women's fault for refusing to have sex with me.

As Q4 shows, Rodger saw himself as a victim at the mercy of society and women. He believed he was not responsible for his inability to reach his goals and instead put the blame on others, most notably women. The way he saw himself as a victim also showed in how he often felt personally attacked. For instance, he always considered it a personal insult when others were enjoying the things or the activities that he wanted to experience himself, like socialising in class or flirting with women. For Rodger, his life was full of horrible things that

other people and society did to him. Rodger saw his goals and his inability to reach them as entirely dependent on external factors and remained passive instead of actively working towards his goals.

### **Real-World Aspects Related to Low Trait Hope**

Several real-world aspects that are related to low trait hope were identified in Rodger's manifesto. They were captured in six codes with a total of 13 sub-codes. The codes were *psychological maladjustment*, *escape fantasies*, *unsociability*, *performance outcomes*, *risk factors*, and *mass-murder suicide*. These codes described real-world aspects associated with, outcomes of, and risk factors for low trait hope.

**Psychological maladjustment.** *Psychological maladjustment* was about Rodger's negative emotions, depressive symptoms, self-worth, and envy. It had two sub-codes, namely *negative emotions and depressive symptoms* and *low self-worth and envy*.

**Negative emotions and depressive symptoms.** Rodger often felt defeated, hopeless, and sad, especially when he failed reach his goals or gave up his goal-pursuit. He also experienced this when he saw others fare better at his goals than he did. Other depressive symptoms he discussed were loneliness, lack of meaningful relationships, suicidal ideation, and a negative view of himself, the world, and the future. Rodger explicitly expressed feeling depressed several times, mostly in relation to his inability to form relationships and the loneliness and social isolation he felt. He also felt depressed about how other people were able to experience parties, friendships, and intimate relationships during their youth and young adult years while he was not able to reach these goals of his. The negative emotions and feelings of depression Rodger felt were a significant part of the suffering he experienced.

**Low self-worth and envy.** Rodger had a low sense of self-worth and felt great envy towards people he thought were better than himself. He habitually compared himself to people who had a better social life, who were confident or popular, or who were "taller and stronger than [himself]". Faced with blockage in all those goals himself while seeing others do so, he felt inferior to those people, which lowered his sense of self-worth. This first began when he started to perceive a social hierarchy in school:

[Q5] As Fourth Grade started, it fully dawned on me that I was the shortest kid in my class – even the girls were taller than me. In the past, I rarely gave a thought to it, but at this stage I became extremely annoyed at how everyone was taller than me, and how the tallest boys were automatically respected more. It instilled the first feelings of inferiority in me, and such feelings would only grow more volatile with time.

Q5 exemplifies Rodger's habit to compare himself to others and how this comparison led him to see himself at the bottom of the social hierarchy through which he saw the world. Rodger would often engage in self-deprecating thoughts in which he would call himself a failure or thinking that he sucked. Q5 also already shows the negative emotions he perceived because of his envy of those who had what he wanted. His self-worth especially lowered during the years he was bullied. By the time he hit puberty and developed an interest in intercourse, "[he] wanted sex, yet [he] felt unworthy of it." Rodger had a low sense of self-worth and felt inferior to those he saw as higher in the social hierarchy, whom he looked on with envy.

**Escape fantasies.** This code was about Rodger's habit to engage in escape fantasies. He used video games, fantasies about what the world and society should be like, and fantasies about living his dreams to find escape from his life and the suffering he perceived. This code had two sub-codes, namely *video games*, *fantasy scenarios*, and *violent revenge fantasies*.

**Video games.** Rodger spent extensive amounts of time playing video games. When he first discovered video games, he used them to bond over with his father and his friends. However, when "[his] life was getting more and more depressing" in middle school, gaming, especially World of Warcraft [WoW], became a tool to "fill in the void." He literally used the fantasy gaming-genre as a means to escape. Although this provided some sense of escape, Rodger became more aloof and isolated in the real world. It also had other negative effects on his life. His grades dropped and he lost contact with the few friends he had. After a while, he started feeling lonely even while playing WoW, because of which his depression worsened. Rodger did quit playing WoW at some point. Still, video games like WoW were an important escape tool in his life.

**Fantasy scenarios.** Rodger frequently engaged in fantasy scenarios. He had three major kinds of those. The first kind were ideas he developed according to which sex, society, and women were evil. Rodger realised that he developed these ideas only because he was dissatisfied with his own life. He said: "I saw sex as an evil and barbaric act, all because I was unable to have it." Secondly, he constructed a grandiose self-image in which he was "magnificent, glorious, supreme, eminent [and] divine". He stated that the reason women were not throwing themselves at him was that as a superior being, he stood above the rest of humanity, who were "vicious beasts in a jungle." These fantasies cumulated in "fascist views", according to which either intercourse should be outlawed, or women should be distributed to men like Rodger, or scenarios where he was a powerful, god-like leader. Thirdly, he dreamed up fantasy scenarios about living the life of his dreams. In those, he would fantasise about having intercourse, women, wealth, high social status, and the

adoration of those around him. Unable to fulfil his goals, Rodger mentally created different ideas and worlds that helped him escape the misery he experienced because of it.

***Violent revenge fantasies.*** One kind of the fantasy scenarios Rodger engaged in stood out in particular, namely his *violent revenge fantasies*. They were similar to the aforementioned fantasies about acting out what he could not do in his real life. At the same time, they stood in stark contrast to these fantasies. Instead of fantasising about the pleasurable things he wanted, these fantasies were about exacting “vengeance against all of the men who [had] pleasurable sex lives” and “women [who] must be punished for their crimes of rejecting such a magnificent gentleman as [himself].” His fantasies were about physically harming those people, often through torture or murder. Some of his fantasies like “[splashing others] with [his] orange juice” paled in comparison with the violence he described in his more extreme fantasies.

***Unsociability.*** This code was about Rodger’s lack of social skills, struggle with interpersonal relationships, and his attitude towards other people. These aspects were of particular importance in Rodger’s life since many of his goals were related to having a social life. This code had the two sub-codes *struggle to connect with others* and *hostile and unforgiving*.

***Struggle to connect with others.*** One of Rodger’s most prevalent issues was his *struggle to connect with others*. Much of this struggle was rooted in his poor social skills. Rodger discussed having social anxiety disorder (SAD) and he indeed showed many related symptoms. He was shy, felt anxious about social situations, and afraid to engage with other people, especially women as Q3 shows. Afraid of scrutiny as in Q3, he often shied away from social interaction altogether. Still, Rodger was desperate for people’s attention. Since he “never knew how to gain positive attention [from other people], only negative”, he often antagonised people around him. .” In response to his behaviour and his persona which, as he said, “[attracted] bullies like moths to a flame”, he was severely bullied in school and once got beaten up in college, which caused him to withdraw further into himself. Rodger felt lonely and disconnected most of his life. Often his only form of social interaction was with his friend James Ellis, his “only friend,” who often provided almost the only form of social interaction in periods of Rodger’s life. Rodger’s problems with social interaction, forming, and maintaining relationships left him feeling lonely and isolated.

***Hostile and unforgiving.*** Over the course of his life, Rodger grew increasingly *hostile and unforgiving*. He made many actual and perceived negative experiences with other people. In middle and high school he had no friends and was severely bullied. He developed hatred

for the boys who actively bullied him. Even more, he hated the girls who stood by, as he believed that women were attracted to such behaviour and “[flocked] to these men.” In contrast, Rodger received no positive attention from women. During twelfth grade, he said: “I felt that no girl would ever want to have sex with me... And I developed extreme feelings of envy, hatred, and anger towards anyone who has a sex life.” He began to see the whole world as cruel and brutal. Rodger often felt personally insulted when others were better able to reach goals which he set for himself. When he saw pictures “with various girls” a friend had posted, he felt immense hatred, saying: “What was seen can never be unseen, and I will never forget it, nor will I forgive it.” Rodger suffered greatly from the lack of female attention he experienced. What exacerbated this, is that he felt that the same type of men who had bullied him got exactly this attention and developed intense, hostile feelings. The way Rodger saw insults everywhere and his unwillingness to forgive others appeared to further fuel his hostility towards the world, especially towards women.

**Performance outcomes.** This code was about Rodger’s lack of success in life domains such as education, sports, or employment and about engaging in adaptive or maladaptive health behaviours. It had two sub-codes, *low to mediocre success* and *maladaptive health behaviour*.

**Low to mediocre success.** Rodger showed *low to mediocre success* in his academic, sportive, and employment-related endeavours. His performance in school was mediocre, even though he appeared to have an aptitude for academic education. In college, he often dropped his classes. His academic performance was negatively affected by how he was blocked in his social-life goals. This was aggravated when he saw other people succeed in his goals. For instance, he often dropped classes in college upon seeing other people flirt. In the domain of sports, Rodger had less of an aptitude. He felt unsuccessful in his pursuit of skateboarding and karate and gave up on both. Concerning employment, Rodger considered most work, such as “simple retail [jobs]” beneath him. He never held a long-term job. Overall, Rodger lacked the perseverance to continue academic, sportive and employment endeavours when he was unsatisfied with them for any reason.

**Maladaptive health behaviour.** Rodger showed some *maladaptive health behaviour*. In his youth and periodically in his adult life, Rodger spent extensive amounts of time playing video games, a usually sedentary and, thus, unhealthy behaviour. Physical exercise did not appear to be a big part of Rodger’s life and he stated himself that he was “in need of [it].” He also developed a habit of drinking increasing amounts of alcohol and stuffing himself with

food, especially at social gatherings when he saw others get the attention he craved. Overall, Rodger engaged in more unhealthy than healthy behaviours.

**Risk factors.** This code was about the presence of risk factors for the loss of hope in Rodger's life. Risk factors were identified in the caregiving he received, his inability to make connections with other people, and events he experienced that could be interpreted as traumatic.

**Caregivers.** The sub-code caregivers involved risk factors in Rodger's childhood connected to his caregivers. Rodger's experienced very different parenting styles from his caregivers. He felt that his father was mostly absent from his life. This worsened after experiencing his parents' divorce. His step-mother had strict rules and used punishments that were, from Rodger's point of view, arbitrary. Both stood in stark contrast to his mother, who fulfilled every wish her had. Another source of inconsistency in his childhood was that Rodger's family changed residence a lot. Concerning his caregivers, Rodger experienced some inconsistency in parenting styles and the boundaries they set.

**Traumatic events.** Rodger made some experiences that he felt were traumatic. He was severely bullied in middle and high school. His possessions would be stolen, he would be pushed into lockers and insulted. In college, he was once severely beaten, falling off a ledge, and breaking his leg in the process. Rodger's antagonising behaviour may have played a part in bringing about the bullying he experienced. Moreover, he had aggressively provoked the people who ended up beating him up. Regardless, he experienced these events as traumatic. Furthermore, Rodger felt continuously isolated, lonely, and disconnected as mentioned before. Overall, there were several risk factors for the loss of hope present both in his childhood and adult life.

**Mass-murder suicide.** This code was about the process of how Rodger adopted a suicide goal, in his case in the form of mass-murder suicide. It was about how Rodger experienced unending goal blockage and suffered because of it. As a result, he began to view suicide as his only way out of his suffering and developed the desire to hurt as many people in the process as a means of getting his revenge against society. It was also about how adopting this suicide goal paradoxically led him to experience high-trait-hope thinking in terms of his goal setting, pathway thinking, and agency thinking concerning this goal. This code had two sub-codes, namely *escaping misery*, and *suicide as the "final act of hope"*.

**Escaping misery.** Rodger was rarely able to fulfil his goals. Particularly concerning his social-life goals, he faced constant goal blockage. He wanted to "have a great social life again, to have a girlfriend, to have sex" or even just interact with women. Instead, he made

multiple negative experiences with social interactions, like being bullied. Unable to reach his goals he experienced suffering and depression. In response, he began to discard his life goals in favour of a suicide goal. Rodger had amassed hatred, anger, and dreams of exacting revenge on society because of the way he felt he had been treated. Because of this, he developed a suicide goal in the form of mass-murder suicide. He continued to look for reasons to live for but could not see any. Ultimately, he fully committed to his suicide goal, which became his way to escape his misery, to take vengeance, and his only reason to live.

***Suicide as the “final act of hope”.*** This sub-code involved the process of how Rodger showed high-trait-hope thinking concerning the adoption of his suicide goal. Although this goal was destructive to himself and those around him, it turned his goal setting, pathway thinking, and agency thinking upside down. He formulated his suicide goal in a detailed way, for instance with an exact date. After a prior experience, when Rodger had thrown his coffee over a couple as an act of revenge for kissing in front of him, he had realised that he was capable of inflicting pain on the people he despised. In this light, his goals about revenge now seemed more realistic to him and not based on external factors but on his own actions as compared to his prosocial goals. He created plausible, clearly formulated routes towards his suicide goal. Specifically, he began preparing in a shooting range, started purchasing guns and ammunition, and laid out a detailed plan about whom he would attack and how for his “Day of Retribution”. He also became more flexible, creating alternative routes in case there were impediments. His agency thinking changed, as well. He believed in his capability to carry out his plans and engaged in positive self-affirmation. He now saw himself as able to actively shape his life, in this regard. He experienced lifted energy levels and tried to make as many memorable experiences as he could leading up to his suicide. Instead of spending hours alone in his room ruminating about his misery, he “went on hikes in the mountains of Montecito, wandered around aimlessly in beautiful parks [and] took strolls along the beach [...]”. His suicide goal provided him with direction, but it was destructive, antisocial, thwarted any chance for him to lead a good life, and hurt and ended the lives of many innocent people in the process.

### **Rodger’s Low Trait Hope**

Rodger held prosocial goals for most of his life. However, he showed debilitating goal setting, low pathway thinking, and low agency thinking, which was related to his experience of constant goal blockage. Both were related to his psychological maladjustment, to his maladaptive social behaviour, to his performance outcomes in sports, academics, and employment, to the risk factors present in his life, and to the adoption of antisocial goals, and

to the act of carrying them out in his mass-murder suicide. All in all, the results suggest that Rodger was a low hoper.

### **Discussion**

The present study aimed to employ a positive psychology approach to investigate a particularly extreme incel. Previous studies have, to the best of the author's knowledge, focused exclusively on psychopathological aspects of incels, inceldom, and incel mass shooters. To address this gap in scientific literature, Rodger's manifesto was examined from a positive psychological perspective. Namely, a hope theory framework was used to examine his trait hope and goals.

To this end, it was investigated what aspects of low trait hope could be identified in Rodger's manifesto. Rodger's showed low trait hope in his goal setting, pathway thinking, and agency thinking. His goal setting was vague, unrealistic, and externalised. He lacked the ability to create plausible routes towards his goals and was inflexible. He showed self-doubt, low motivation, and passivity concerning his goal-pursuit. Furthermore, in line with expectations, real-world aspects related to low trait hope were also identified. Rodger was isolated and often felt lonely and depressed. He adopted a hostile attitude towards others. He engaged in fantasies to escape his life. In many of these fantasies, he was able to reach his goals of living a pleasurable life full of women and status or of getting revenge by harming those he felt hurt by. He showed poor performances in school, jobs, and the sports he pursued. Overall, these results suggest that Rodger was low in trait hope.

Secondly, we examined in what way prosocial and antisocial goals could be identified in his manifesto. Analysis revealed that prosocial goals, like forming and maintaining relationships and having people's adoration, were Rodger's most important life goals. Rodger continuously failed to reach prosocial his goals and was, thus, isolated. He developed antisocial goals about exacting revenge on the people he held responsible for his plight. His antisocial goals were a response to his unfulfilled prosocial ones. For instance, he could not have intercourse, so it should be outlawed. He could not have the love of women, so he hated them instead. Despite adopting these antisocial goals, Rodger held on to his prosocial ones for a long time. Eventually, he discarded all his goals for his antisocial and destructive mass-murder-suicide goal.

Rodger had prosocial goals but was low in trait hope. His goal setting put him up for failure even before initiating goal-pursuit. The vague manner in which he formulated his goals did not allow him to determine what progress or goal-attainment would look like. This made



his goals seem large and distal. Thus, even when he made progress, it seemed meaningless. Rodger often set goals about leading a marvellous social life to overcompensate for his lack thereof. However, he had poor social skills. These were related to his lack of a social life in the first place. Considering his poor social skills, those goals he set were unrealistically high. In addition, many of his goals were outside of his control, like changing the way people viewed him. Setting goals that are vague, too high, or outside of one's control is related to low trait hope (Snyder, 2002). Furthermore, such goals decrease performance and result in frustration (Locke & Latham, 2002; Walter & Peller, 1992). In line with this, Rodger experienced constant goal blockage and, with it, anger, and sadness.

Rodger's goal setting also impaired his ability to create routes towards his goals and his perceived ability to reach them. Rodger could often not think of how to reach his goals at all. This was exacerbated by the fact that most of his goals were social. With poor social skills, he was unable to figure out how to form and maintain relationships with people. Rodger also doubted his ability to reach his goals and lacked motivation to try. He was often aware of his poor social skills. Thus, he expected himself to fail should he try to pursue such goals. As Snyder (2002) states, "it is difficult to imagine having pathways or motivation to pursue vague goals" (p. 3). Additionally, low hoppers struggle more in the social domain as compared to high hoppers (Snyder, 2002). Rodger was left caught in a vicious cycle. He was dissatisfied with his social life because of which he set goals about having a great social life. However, he set goals that were too vague, high, or external. He felt unable to reach these goals and afraid of others scrutiny. As such, he shied away from opportunities to try. Thus, his situation did not change. This left him frustrated and still dissatisfied with his social life. This is similar to the vicious cycles in cognitive models of social anxiety disorder (SAD; Clark & Wells, 1995; Westbrook, Kennerley, & Kirk, 2011). Rodger indeed believed he had and showed symptoms of SAD, such as severe shyness and his persistent fear of being negatively evaluated (White, 2017; World Health Organization, 2019). Overall, Rodger's low pathway and agency thinking appeared related to his debilitating goal setting and poor social skills. All of these were, in turn, related to the goal blockage he experienced.

The constant goal blockage Rodger experienced was related to the suffering he went through. He was unable to fulfil his goals of forming relationships. This left him isolated and lonely. Rodger experienced feelings of inferiority and envy towards more confident and socially successful people. He went through periods of severe depression and showed suicidal ideation. Rodger was unwilling to accept responsibility for his suffering. Instead, he blamed women and society. He, thus, felt anger, rage, and hatred towards women and sexually and

socially successful men. In line with this, low hoppers are less confident and experience more depression as compared to high hoppers (Snyder, 2002; Tierney, 1994). Studies on Hungarian college students have shown that low trait hope is associated with suicidal ideation (Chang, 2017; Chang, Chang, Martos, & Sallay, 2018; Davidson, 2009). Low hoppers quickly get derailed when faced with problems in their goal-pursuit (Snyder, 2002). They are more hostile and unforgiving of other people as compared to high hoppers (Snyder, 2002). In addition, low hoppers feel more passive in their goal pursuit (Snyder, 2002). On a similar note, avoidant problem-solvers shift responsibility to others in the model of problem-solving as they seek to avoid problems (D'Zurilla, Nezu, & Maydeu-Olivares, 2004), which Rodger certainly did. Rodger saw no way to escape his suffering and felt hatred for the people he blamed for it.

Stuck in his suffering, Rodger engaged in escape fantasies. Some fantasies were mere rationalisation of his problems; a belief that people were primitive and that he was superior helped him cope with his inability to connect to them. In those fantasies, he was able to live out his goals. Fantasies of a great social life full of women and pleasurable experiences provided him with short-term relief from his loneliness. Fantasies of harming and punishing people, which went to the point of murdering them, provided him with an imaginary world in which he felt powerful instead of inferior. When low hoppers are unable to overcome goal blockage, they tend to avoid it by engaging in escape fantasies. (Snyder, 2002). Indeed, although Rodger's fantasies provided him with short-term relief, he often engaged in them instead of actively pursuing his goals and working on his problems.

Rodger's escape fantasies represented his goals. His prosocial goals showed in his fantasies about a fulfilling social life. His antisocial ones were related to these prosocial goals: unable to socialise with women and popular people, he instead blamed them for denying him a social life. He developed fantasies about punishing these people. For most of his life, Rodger felt unable to reach both types of goals. He thought he could neither form relationships nor become powerful enough to punish women and society for it. However, this changed for his antisocial goals. Towards the end of his life, the only way that Rodger saw to end his suffering was to commit suicide. Coupled with his fantasies of exacting revenge, Rodger developed a suicide goal in the form of mass-murder suicide. He specified his goal, for instance with a date. Prior, Rodger had once thrown his coffee over a couple as a small act of revenge for kissing in front of him. He had considered his goals about revenge as realistic and inside of his control ever since. With a specific, realistic, and internal goal in mind, he created detailed plans and felt motivated to carry them out. This high-trait-hope thinking was related to his ability to reach this destructive goal. According to Snyder (1994, 2002),

individuals may adopt a suicide goal after being continuously unable to reach their goals. They may then show high pathway and agency thinking concerning their suicide goal (Snyder, 1994, 2002).

Rodger received different interventions, mostly concerning his social skills. He met with three counsellors during his time in Isla Vista (Rodger, 2014; Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office [SBCSO], 2015). However, he felt like he did not benefit from this counselling (White, 2017). For instance, he was once out with one of his counsellors whom Rodger described as handsome (White, 2017). Rodger got jealous because unlike himself this counsellor was drawing in attention from women (White, 2017). This only caused more feelings of rage. Even with the counselling he received, his situation did not improve. The complex issues Rodger displayed, some of which he kept hidden, like his violent ideation, went beyond the domain of social skills counsellors (White, 2017). Rodger was continuously unable to reach his goals. Whenever he failed or was reminded of his failure by other people's success, he experienced depression, trauma, or rage. Higher hope is associated with more successful goal-setting behaviour and can buffer against the effects of negative life events (Cheavens, 2019; Garland et al., 2010; Visser et al., 2013). As such, Rodger may have benefitted from interventions that increase trait hope, such as hope therapy (Cheavens et al., 2006). This is, however, mere speculation that warrants research into the effectiveness of hope-based interventions in improving the lives of incels.

Previous studies have mainly explained the course of Rodger's life with a focus on the negative. Explanations such as that he was a psychopathic and psychotic shooter (Langman, 2014) or a shy narcissist (White, 2017) are all viable. We added a positive psychological perspective, namely that of hope theory, to the study into Rodger. In that, we were able to create a more comprehensive picture of his life, his problems, and of how he came to commit mass-murder suicide. Considering that trait hope can buffer negative outcomes, hope theory also highlights possible approaches for interventions that could be beneficial in improving the lives of incels. The latter is, again, only speculation.

Rodger was an extreme case of an incel who took his misogynistic, misanthropic, and violent incel ideology to an equally misogynistic, misanthropic, and violent conclusion. There is evidence that other incel shooters showed similarities to Rodger. Other incel mass shooters expressed unfulfilled desires for social, romantic, and sexual relationships, as well (Williams & Arntfield, 2020). They, too, blamed women for it (Williams & Arntfield, 2020). Unfulfilled relationship desires and blaming women are also common in incels in general. Maxwell, Robinson, Williams, and Keaton (2020) found that incels experience rejection by women. In

response, they blame women for their loneliness and isolation (Maxwell et al., 2020). Despite these similarities, we can only speculate whether low trait hope played a similar role in the life of other (extreme) incels. As such, any generalisations to such individuals based on the present study should be treated with care. More research is needed to confirm whether other (extreme) incels were low in trait hope and if that was related to the goal blockage they experienced.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research**

The present findings should be considered in light of a few strengths and limitations. In using deductive content analysis guided by hope theory, we were able to take an in-depth look into the life of an extreme incel. The rich data that were obtained allowed interpretations of how Rodger's life, problems, and consequences thereof were interconnected and related to his trait hope. However, there was only one investigator who coded the source and interpreted the data. Thus, researcher bias may have been introduced in analysis and interpretation (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2003). This may have affected the reliability of the findings negatively.

Furthermore, coding of relevant fragments of Rodger's manifesto was done in consideration of the content of the whole document. Rodger wrote his manifesto post hoc. As such, his later experiences may have influenced his recollection of earlier events. In this light, it was decided to also consider the manifesto as a whole in the analysis. This helped to connect single parts of the manifesto and put them into the greater context. The possibility remains that this introduced a sort-of halo effect where some parts of the manifesto should have been treated in isolation but were coded in consideration of the whole or of other parts, which may have been an additional source of researcher bias (Murphy, Jako, & Anhalt, 1993; Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2003).

Elliot Rodger represents an extreme case of an incel. In his case, incel-related problems were highlighted and more conspicuous. Such problems included, amongst others, feelings of rejection, depression, rage, suicidal ideation, and externalising blame for once involuntary celibacy to women or one's looks (Donnelly et al., 2001; Ging, 2019; Jaki et al., 2019; Langman, 2014; White, 2017). Despite these similarities with the problems other incels face, any generalisation of the findings to other incels should be treated with care. The lives of other incels may differ from Rodger's to varying degrees. Thus, it remains questionable how applicable the present findings are to other incels, particularly to those who are less extreme.

Future studies should aim to investigate the role of trait hope in the lives of Rodger or other incels a more reliable manner. One approach to do so is to employ methods of

triangulation of sources and investigators (Onwuegbuzie & Daniel, 2003). For example, future studies could apply the coding scheme developed in the present study to the writings of other incels, like threads on incel forums. Using multiple sources and coders in this way could address possible sources of researcher bias, like possible personal bias and halo effects, in the present study and lead to more reliable findings.

In addition, such a research design could also address the present issue of an extreme case. Individuals active in incel forums are a heterogeneous group with diverse sets of views and problems (Jaki et al., 2019). Applying the coding scheme to such writings could yield information about whether aspects of low trait hope can be identified in other incels, as well. Furthermore, it could shine a light on whether the dynamic of prosocial and antisocial goals as found in Rodger's case is similar for other incels. This could reveal whether incels, in general, are low in trait hope. It could also reveal whether they are at risk of going through the same process of abandoning all prosocial goals for antisocial suicide goals as Rodger was.

Additionally, quantitative studies should measure the relationship of trait hope and incel-traits as found by Saptura and Boyle (2019). If a negative correlation of trait hope and incel traits were found, future studies should also investigate whether incel traits can be reduced through hope-based interventions; these interventions have been shown to reliably increase hope and well-being and decrease depressive symptoms across diverse samples (Ahari, 2012; Berg et al., 2019; Cheavens et al., 2006; Diessner et al., 2006; Ho, 2012). Finding effective treatment for incels is paramount to prevent further suicide and violence by incels.

### **Implications for Practice**

As mentioned above, the present study was about an extreme and individual case of an incel. Implications for practice can, if at all, only be made for similarly extreme incels. The experiences of these individuals may, however, differ from Rodger's. Thus, even implications concerning other extreme incels must be treated with care. All implications made here are purely speculative and research is needed to examine whether they can be helpful for incels.

Having said that, research has shown similarities between Rodger and other incels mass shooters. Like Rodger, other incel mass shooters express unfulfilled social goals, experiences of depression, and blame women for their suffering (Donnelly et al., 2001; Jaki et al., 2019; Maxwell et al., 2020; Williams & Arntfield, 2020). Practitioners working with (extreme) incels may want to consider addressing trait hope in their approaches to treatment. For instance, they may provide such individuals with information about hope theory in terms of goal setting, pathway and agency thinking. Beyond that, interventions aimed at increasing

trait hope and goal setting could be particularly valuable. Such interventions could include hope-therapy, solution-focused therapy, or problem-solving therapy (Cheavens et al., 2006; D’Zurilla et al., 2004; Walter & Peller, 1992).

Rodger expressed the need to belong and to have relationships. He suffered greatly from his loneliness. We want to point to Maxwell et al. (2020) who had similar findings concerning incels, in general. They recommended group therapy to address and share experiences with loneliness and isolation (Maxwell et al., 2020). Moreover, they particularly mentioned the option of doing this in an online setting since online settings are a major part of incels life (Maxwell et al., 2020). Besides, online interventions are beneficial for socially anxious individuals (Littleton et al. 2016; Richards et al., 2013). We want to continue their point, with the addition of hope-based interventions to such settings, which could support incels to reach their social goals.

Although Rodger was aware of his problems, he habitually rationalised them. Furthermore, Rodger blamed other people, showed a low sense of self-worth, and got depressed about those problems. Rationalisation, scapegoating, displacement, and internalisation are all defences of people in the pre-contemplative stage of behavioural change (Prochaska, Norcross, & DiClemente, 1994; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997). There are three change processes that help practitioners move clients away from this stage (Prochaska et al., 1994; Prochaska & Velicer, 1997), which may apply to incels. Consciousness-raising, such as education, creates awareness of defences that are in the way of initiating change. Close relationships, like Rodger’s family best friend, can decrease self-defeating behaviour through trust and acceptance. Social liberation, like support groups, can make the individual realise they are not alone and provide encouragement. This latter point again emphasizes the recommendation of online group therapy (Maxwell et al., 2020).

However, without further research on trait-hope, goal setting, and these intervention approaches in the case of incels, we can only speculate whether they would be effective treatment approaches for them.

### **Conclusion**

Incels have received increasing attention in social science research in recent years. However, positive psychological theories have largely been neglected in this regard. A focus on exclusively the negative may create an incomplete picture and antagonise incels further. We added to a more comprehensive research into inceldom by applying a positive psychological theory to an extreme case of an incel. Specifically, we applied a hope theory framework to the manifesto of Elliot Rodger. Rodger showed multiple signs of low trait hope.

The way he formulated his goals was debilitating to his goal-pursuit. He was unable to create routes towards his goals. He had low motivation and a low perceived capability to reach his goals. All of this was related to his inability to reach them. Most of these goals were about a desire to belong and be adored. Instead, he found himself isolated and ignored. Rodger experienced depression and felt inferior to more socially successful people. He blamed other people, particularly women, for his suffering and developed a desire for violent revenge towards these people. Ultimately, he abandoned all his other goals for a mass-murder suicide goal. This goal was destructive and antisocial. However, it was specific, realistic, and Rodger considered it inside of his control. With such a goal in mind, he was able to create detailed routes towards it and felt a surge of energy and motivation to reach it. More research is needed to investigate whether other, less extreme incels are low in trait hope and whether they might be at risk to abandon all their prosocial goals for antisocial ones. If so, research should be devoted to whether their problems can be alleviated by increasing trait hope.

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